

# HERALD

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## Truancy court at Bain to speed up processing

By JOY FOX

The wait time to process truancy cases in Cranston will be significantly reduced as of Oct. 12, according to Tom Fazio, the truant officer for the city. On that day, court will officially be in session at Hugh B. Bain Middle School, when Rhode Island Family Court opens the state's sixth Family Truancy Court.

Fazio estimated that currently truancy cases take between 10 to 12 weeks to process through the family court system.

"Now, truant specific cases will take only two to three weeks to process, depending on their load," said Fazio. "I think this is a great thing that will get cases moving a lot quicker."

The courtroom was officially announced on Tuesday morning, Sept. 11, at Bain.

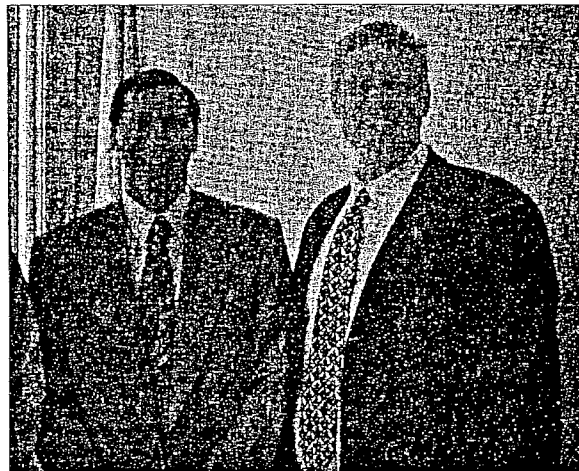
Last year, the Cranston School Department had about 100-120 petitions filed for the practice of being absent from school without permission or truancy. Of those petitions, about 15 to 20 percent made it to court, said Fazio.

While the physical location of the court is at Bain, the court will service all three of the city's public middle schools, including Park View and Western Hills.

A conference room on the first floor of Bain has been converted to resemble a courtroom, including a bench for the magistrate flanked on either side by American and Rhode Island flags. Principal Michael O'Rourke also had the portraits of Presidents George Washington and Abraham Lincoln from the school library, along with a Hugh B. Bain portrait, placed on the wall overlooking the proceedings.

Bain is also home to the violence prevention-planning center that began last year at the Gladstone Elementary School. O'Rourke believes both initiatives tie in nicely with the school taking "proactive steps" to help its students.

Superintendent Catherine Ciarlo



hoped the court would help to get students to come and stay at school.

"Increasing attendance is a critical component to achieving good grades. We are very excited about this," she said.

The placement of Family Truancy Courts within community schools began last year in Woonsocket, Central Falls, Pawtucket and Newport middle schools. Hope High School in Providence is the only school in the state focusing on the high school population.

The primary targets for the court initiative is the middle school population. Truancy court officials think that the program can make the biggest impact at that level.

"Middle school is definitely where our focus should be," said James Coffone, assistant superintendent of Cranston schools on Tuesday. Eventually, he said, the program may include the younger siblings of those offenders, in an effort to reach more students.

Angela Buccì, a Bain graduate and lifelong Cranston resident, serves as the court's magistrate statewide and will conduct the

weekly court sessions at Bain as well. A magistrate holds all of the responsibility of a judge but their position is not tenured. Magistrates serve at the will of the chief judge. Over the last year of the program Buccì says the program is "incredibly successful."

Last year, the court saw 200 students who had an average attendance rate, prior to their court proceedings, of 49 percent.

"By the end of the school year that number reached 89 percent," she said.

The percentage does not include justified absences such as illness.

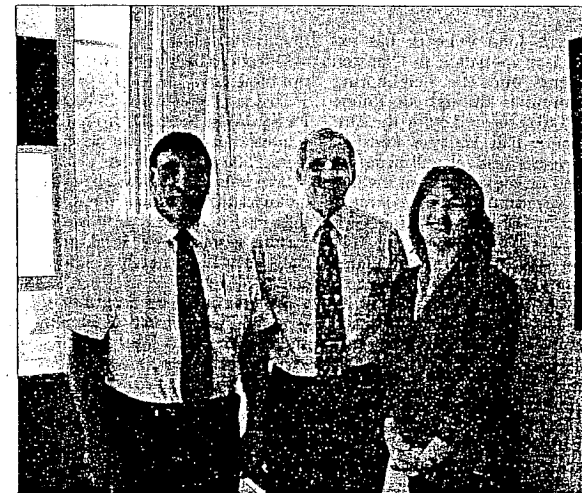
Buccì believes the success of the program is its holistic approach of dealing with school and family issues with a myriad of community service programs.

In Cranston, the Comprehensive Community Action Program (CCAP) will provide the community support to the court. CCAP intends to have a representative present at each court session for referral services, according to Joanne McGunagle, executive director.

"CCAP has been working with

### Fighting the unexcused absence

Park View Principal Gary Spemullo and Western Hills Principal Peter Nero, at left, joined Cranston's Truancy Officer Tom Fazio, Bain Principal Michael O'Rourke and Magistrate Angela Buccì on Tuesday for the announcement of the school department's first Family Truancy Court at Bain Middle School. All three Cranston middle schools will use the court. (Cranston Herald photo)



Chair of the Board of Regents Jim DiPrete for their involvement.

According to the Family Court, truancy is the most powerful indicator of juvenile delinquent behavior. Before the inception of the Truancy Court, judges heard truancy cases on the Juvenile Delinquency Court calendars. In most cases, according to family court, it would take between one and two months before a truancy petition appeared on the formal calendar for arraignment. During that time children would miss more days of school. However, due to the nature of the juvenile calendar, truancy cases took a back seat to more violent offenses.

DiPrete, also a graduate of Bain, said, "The opening of the court at Bain is one more feather in the cap of the school and the city as well."

Nationally, according to Rhode Island Kids Count, "25 percent of public school principals reported absenteeism to be a serious or moderate problem, and that concern is echoed in Rhode Island."

The court and department of education officials alike point to a variety of rea-

sons for truancy, including instability at home, substance abuse and other socioeconomic issues, such as not having enough money for clothing. Poor attendance may also be a signal of emotional and mental health problems.

Truancy Court participants and their parents are required to report to the court weekly, unless otherwise ordered by the magistrate. Guidance counselors and other school officials may also attend the confidential meetings. The parties are notified by a summons granted by the Family Court. However, it is up to individual schools to identify the students to be called.

The magistrate may impose penalties on the students who are found in violation, including home confinement and curfews. The whole process lasts about a year, said Buccì.

"It is an informal adjudication, so in the end nothing appears on a student's permanent record," she said.

"This is another tool for us to use to help kids achieve, and I think that's great," said Peter Nero, principal of Western Hills Middle School.